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WHITE PAPER

Burnout and Autonomy in the Modern Workforce: The Role of AI-Driven Skilling in Equity and Resilience

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Abstract

This white paper examines the intersection of burnout, autonomy, equity, and artificial intelligence (AI) in the U.S. workforce. Drawing on findings from the University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2021–2025, it highlights the record-high burnout levels reported in 2025, the critical role of autonomy in shaping well-being, the equity gaps in training and opportunity, and the potential of AI-driven skilling to restore resilience and competitiveness. It further situates these findings within the peer-reviewed literature and offers actionable strategies for employers to reduce burnout and build a more optimistic, future-ready workforce.

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Executive Summary

The American workforce is experiencing a profound crisis of autonomy and resilience. In 2025, burnout reached an all-time high, with more than half of workers (51%) reporting they feel burnt out (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Nearly a quarter of Americans (21%) report that their sense of control over their professional future has worsened over the past five years. Workers who lack career control are 56% more likely to experience burnout than those who feel in control (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Meanwhile, three in four workers (76%) say they rely on hope to get through the year (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Hope sustains resilience, but relying on hope alone is not a sustainable strategy. For the future of work, structural solutions such as career development, equitable skilling, and AI-enabled opportunities are required.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as a critical tool to restore worker autonomy and reduce burnout. Workers who use AI report greater autonomy, resilience, and optimism, and experience a 25-point reduction in burnout compared to non-users (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). However, only one in three employers currently provides AI training, despite most acknowledging its value for the future of work (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). The mismatch between worker demand and employer investment threatens to deepen the crisis. This white paper examines the intersection of burnout, autonomy, AI, and equity. It argues that AI-driven skilling can serve as a new social contract between employers and workers, addressing the burnout epidemic while strengthening competitiveness.

The Workforce at Its Breaking Point

The Career Optimism Index® reveals a steady erosion of worker well-being across five years of research. In 2021, one in three Americans reported that the pandemic had derailed their careers, and 43% were living paycheck to paycheck (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2021). By 2024, workers increasingly felt replaceable, with 53% saying they were easily replaceable, while only 36% recognized opportunities for internal mobility despite 62% of employers claiming to provide them (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2024). In 2025, burnout reached historic levels, particularly among younger workers: 61% of Gen Z and 57% of Millennials reported burnout, compared to 50% of Gen X and 36% of Baby Boomers (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025).

Employers face mounting consequences. In 2025, 68% of employers reported concerns about turnover, and more than half (51%) reported struggling to find qualified talent (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). The combined toll of burnout, attrition, and stagnation poses significant risks to both individuals and the economy. As shown in Figure 1, burnout rates have risen steadily since 2021, with a disproportionate impact on younger generations.

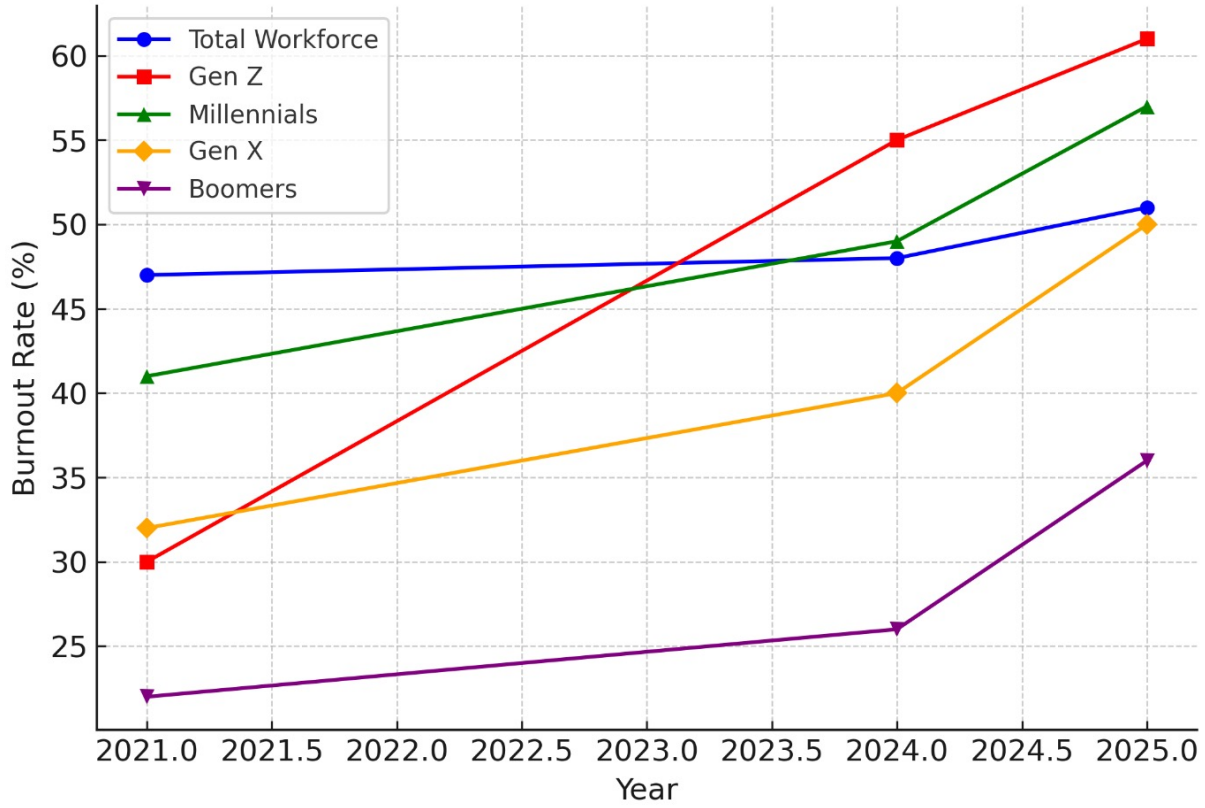

FIGURE 1 | Burnout Rates 2021-2025 by Generation

Note: Adapted from University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® (2025).

Autonomy as the Hidden Lever in Burnout Prevention

Autonomy, defined as the ability to control one's professional path, emerges as a decisive factor in worker well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Workers who lack career control experience burnout at a rate of 70%, compared to 45% among those who feel in control (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Similarly, workers who do not feel they are progressing at the correct pace report burnout rates of 67%, while only 44% of those advancing steadily report burnout (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025).

Research on the Job Demands-Resources Model demonstrates that autonomy and workplace resources serve as buffers against burnout and disengagement (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Career development opportunities are closely tied to autonomy. Workers in development-oriented jobs are 40 percentage points more likely to feel in control of their professional futures. They are significantly more motivated and adaptable (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Table 1 presents a comparison of outcomes for workers with and without career development opportunities.

Condition	Autonomy (%)	Feel in control (%)	Motivated (%)	Adaptable (%)	Burnout (%)
Career development	88	87	92	78	44
No career development	62	47	54	64	67

TABLE 1 | Comparison of Outcomes for Workers with and without Career Development Opportunities

Note: Data adapted from University of Phoenix Career Institute (2025). Higher autonomy, motivation, and adaptability are associated with lower burnout rates.

AI as a Restorative Force

AI is a resilience multiplier. Nearly four in five workers (79%) say AI helps close knowledge gaps, and more than half (56%) believe it accelerates skill development (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Workers who use AI report higher employability (93%) and are less likely to feel replaceable (48%) than non-users (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). They also experience improved productivity (89%) and work-life balance (81%), outcomes strongly linked to reduced burnout (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025).

Scholars caution that automation can also generate anxiety and displacement risk without adequate reskilling, but proactive training can mitigate these effects (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020). Research further suggests that employees who engage in AI-focused upskilling experience greater optimism and adaptability, reinforcing the need for employers to expand access to such training

(Bankins, Hu, & Yuan, 2024). Figure 2 illustrates the benefits of AI use among workers, highlighting differences between users and non-users.

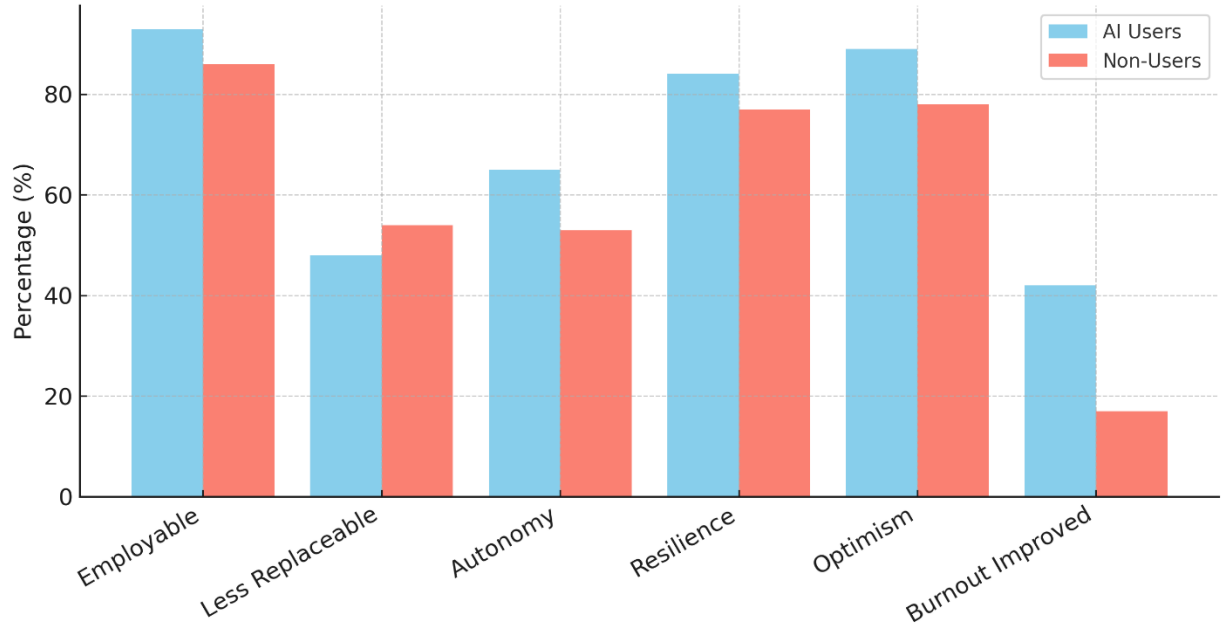

FIGURE 2 | Benefits of AI Use Among Workers

Note: Adapted from University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® (2024, 2025).

The Equity Imperative

Not all workers share equally in optimism and opportunity. Women are more likely than men to report worsening career control (24% vs. 19%) and are also 24% more likely to experience burnout (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Black, Latinx, and Asian workers are significantly more likely than White workers to view AI as critical to skill development, with rates of 65%, 67%, and 68%, respectively, compared to 50% (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Younger workers, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, report both the highest demand for training and the highest burnout rates (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2024; University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Scholarly research reinforces these findings. Structural inequities in advancement opportunities persist across gender and race, with women and workers of color consistently reporting fewer career sponsorship opportunities (McGuire & Reskin, 1993; Catalyst, 2025). Without deliberate intervention, AI skilling could replicate these disparities rather than close them. As shown in Figure 3, disparities in both burnout rates and AI training needs are visible across demographic groups.

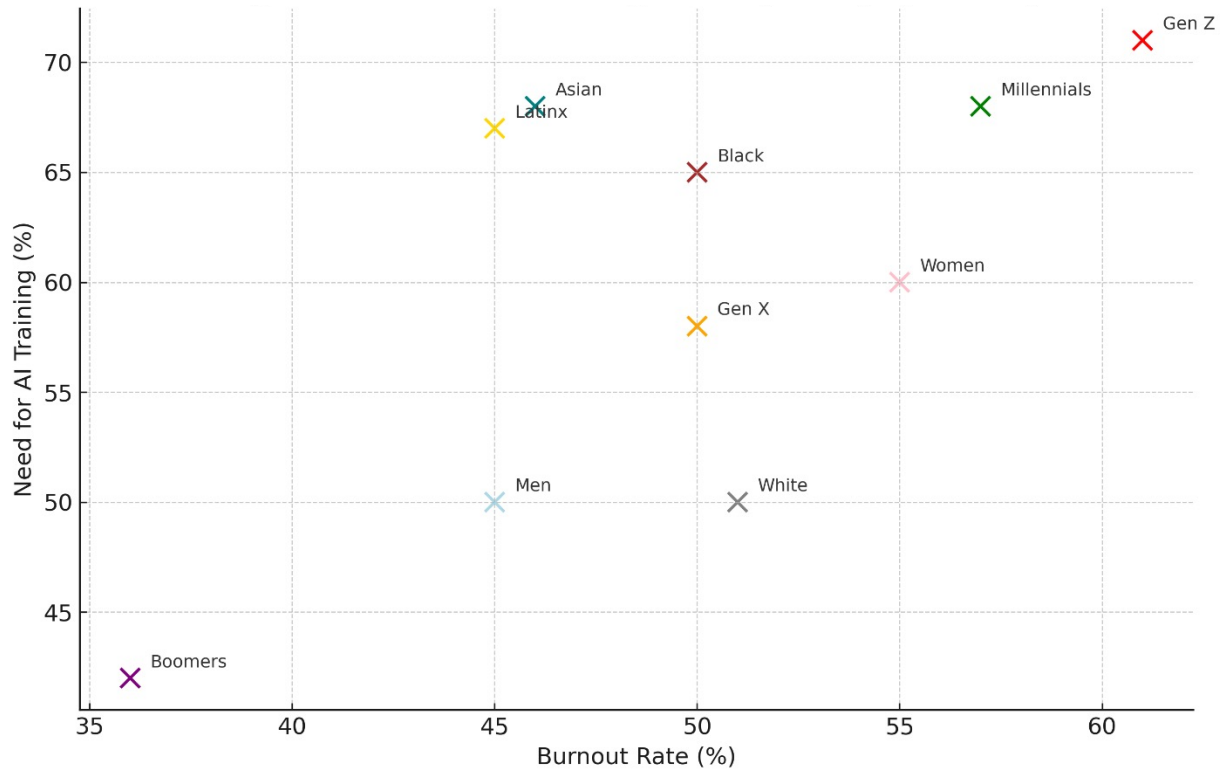

FIGURE 3 | Burnout vs. AI Training Needs by Demographic Group

Note: Adapted from University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® (2024, 2025).

The Business Case for AI-Driven Skilling

Employer investment in optimism and skilling delivers measurable returns. Research in 2024 demonstrated that employers who boost career optimism can save up to $8,053 per worker annually, while workers can increase their annual earnings by up to $5,270 (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2024). Across the U.S. workforce, converting non-optimistic employees into optimistic ones could yield as much as $1.35 trillion in aggregate benefits (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2024; Marquis & Blake, 2024). This finding is consistent with broader research indicating that employee engagement and optimism enhance productivity, decrease turnover, and lower healthcare costs (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Gallup, 2024). Table 2 summarizes the economic benefits of career optimism for both employers and employees.

Benefit	Value
Employer savings per worker	$8,053 annually
Worker salary increase	$5,270 annually
National aggregate benefit	$1.35 trillion

TABLE 2 | Summary of Economic Benefits of Career Optimism for Employers and Employees

Note: Data adapted from University of Phoenix Career Institute (2024) and estimated employer savings and worker salary increases from econometric modeling.

Research Context and Literature Highlights

The findings of the Career Optimism Index are aligned with decades of peer-reviewed research in organizational psychology and economics. Maslach and Leiter (2016) demonstrate that burnout is strongly influenced by lack of autonomy, inadequate recognition, and unsustainable workloads. Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory posits that autonomy is a universal psychological need, essential to motivation and resilience. The Job Demands-Resources Model further reinforces that resources, such as skill development and control over work, reduce the risk of burnout (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

Ultimately, research converges on the conclusion that multiple factors influence burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) demonstrate that burnout is strongly associated with lack of autonomy, inadequate recognition, and unsustainable workloads. Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory identifies autonomy as a universal psychological need that is essential to motivation and resilience. The Job Demands-Resources Model reinforces that resources, such as skill development and control over work, reduce the risk of burnout (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Complementing these perspectives, Salvagioni et al. (2017) provide systematic evidence that burnout is associated with severe physical, psychological, and occupational consequences, reinforcing its significance as a public health and workforce issue. On the technological side, Acemoglu and Restrepo (2020) show that automation without investment in reskilling leads to job displacement and anxiety, whereas reskilling enables organizations to retain talent and

support adaptation. Bankins, Hu, and Yuan (2024) highlight AI literacy as a foundational workforce skill that enhances employability and optimism. Equity research, including McGuire and Reskin (1993) and Catalyst (2025), underscores persistent structural inequities that make equitable access to training essential. Finally, meta-analytic and organizational evidence confirms that engagement and optimism are directly correlated with improved productivity, retention, and financial outcomes (Harter et al., 2002; Gallup, 2024).

Actionable Strategies for Employers

Employers must act decisively to reverse the trend of burnout and restore autonomy. First, AI literacy should be treated as a baseline skill set, a view reinforced by 68% of employers who say AI knowledge is valuable for their employees' careers (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Second, organizations should harness AI not only as a productivity tool but also as a means of personalizing career development pathways, as 79% of workers state AI helps close knowledge gaps (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025). Third, equity must remain central, as evidence shows women and racially diverse workers experience greater barriers but express stronger demand for training opportunities (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2024; University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025; McGuire & Reskin, 1993). Fourth, skilling initiatives should be integrated into wellness strategies, as workers with career development opportunities report lower burnout and greater adaptability (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2025; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Finally, organizations should measure progress by tracking autonomy, burnout, and optimism alongside financial metrics, supported by econometric modeling that demonstrates tangible cost savings from improved optimism (University of Phoenix Career Institute, 2024; Harter et al., 2002). Figure 4 presents a roadmap for employer action linking skilling, equity, and AI training to reduced burnout and improved retention.

Methods and Limitations

The Career Optimism Index® is based on a 20-minute online survey conducted between December 17, 2024, and January 13, 2025. It surveyed a nationally representative sample of 5,005 U.S. adults (age 18+) who either currently work or wish to be working (margin of error ±1.39%), and 500 U.S. employers who play a critical role in hiring and workplace decisions (margin of error ±4.38%). While the survey provides robust insights into workforce and

employer sentiment, results are based on self-reported data, which may be subject to response biases.

Conclusion

Burnout has emerged as a significant challenge for the workforce, primarily driven by a decline in autonomy. The evidence suggests that organizations can mitigate burnout and enhance resilience by investing in career development, equitable access to skills training, and AI-enabled learning. Employers who embrace these strategies will not only reduce burnout but also position their organizations for sustained competitiveness and innovation.

About the University of Phoenix Career Institute®

The University of Phoenix Career Institute® conducts the annual Career Optimism Index® study to understand better the challenges facing today's workforce and to inform actionable solutions. The Institute is committed to advancing research, providing insights, and promoting equity in career development.

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